

**Statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary John Gastright
Before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus
May 24, 2005**

Briefing on Bangladesh

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of this Caucus: thank you for inviting me to come here today to discuss Assistant Secretary Rocca's recent trip to Bangladesh and U.S. policy to aid Bangladesh with its efforts to strengthen democracy and human rights. Let me begin by saying that Bangladesh is a long-time friend of the U.S. It is a democracy and has been most notable over the years for its moderate approach to most things.

Bangladesh has made great strides since independence in 1971, particularly in health, education, and food security. Significantly, by dint of hard work and entrepreneurial skill it has achieved strong GDP growth – more than 5 percent in recent years -- and shed its image of hopeless poverty. Today, more than eight million Bangladeshis earn more than \$10,000 a year.

Our friend has problems, however, and as a friend we are obliged to point these out sympathetically and be available to assist if there is a will to change and a desire for help from the international community. While Bangladesh's private sector has

flourished in recent years, its governmental machinery has had difficulties. Corruption is extensive; the lower courts have not been separated from the executive and face extensive case backlogs; and the police have difficulty enforcing the law. Both major parties, the current governing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League, have held government in recent years. Both, therefore, bear some responsibility for the country's problems of governance, and both bear some responsibility for dealing with them. Unfortunately, relations between the BNP and Awami League are marked by bitter enmity, and the parties have not joined hands to deal with Bangladesh's problems in a bipartisan way.

Bangladesh's governance problems are a significant obstacle to efforts to boost its economic growth to the levels needed to pull large numbers of its citizens out of poverty. Left to grow unchecked, these problems could threaten the democracy that the Bangladeshi people fought so hard to achieve when they convinced the military to leave government and return to the barracks in 1991. Already, a series of attacks on members of the political opposition over the past year – many still unsolved – has cast a pall over national elections expected in 2006.

Governance problems also create a permissive environment in which extremists can operate unhindered. Extremist organizations are already trying to take

advantage of these conditions to set up shop in Bangladesh. We have emphasized to the Bangladesh government that Bangladesh's historical image, as a tolerant, moderate Muslim democracy will be damaged if these groups take root in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh has taken actions against two extremist groups this past February in response to pressure placed by international donors about growing extremism in Bangladesh – and we applaud these actions – but more must be done.

HUMAN RIGHTS / RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Poor governance makes protection of human rights and religious freedom much more difficult. Human rights and religious freedom constitute a regular topic of our dialogue with Bangladesh. We commend the Bangladesh government for measures taken to protect the rights of the Ahmadiya religious minority in the face of threats from anti-Ahmadiya groups, who want Ahmadiyas evicted from their mosques and declared “non-Muslims.”

U.S. officials have expressed concern and urged strong action over the renewed attacks on Ahmadiyas, including police facilitation of extremists and erection of provocative signboards at Ahmadiya Mosques and the ban on Ahmadiya publications that remains under judicial review. We will continue to urge the

Government to uphold the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of religion for all Bangladeshis, including for minority religious groups.

With Bangladesh's judiciary in difficulties, it appears that the authorities have been tempted to take dangerous short-cuts. We are concerned about extra-judicial killings by police units, particularly a mixed military police unit called the Rapid Action Battalion (see Tab 1), and have informed the Bangladeshi Government that if these killings do not cease the Leahy Amendment sanctions will have to be applied. (*The Leahy Amendment prohibits U.S. military assistance to foreign military units that violate human rights with impunity*).

Trafficking in Persons is another concern. Bangladesh was assessed as a Tier 3 country in the 2004 U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. Since then, the Bangladesh government has made consistent across-the-board progress in its anti-TIP efforts. As a result, it was reassessed as a Tier 2, Watch List country in the Department's interim assessment in September of 2004. Since then we have seen the BDG institutionalize important changes and strengthen its anti-TIP efforts and hope that it receives better ranking in GTIP's upcoming report.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman and members of Human Rights Caucus: I have outlined a series of difficulties that Bangladesh confronts. While the list is daunting, I want to be clear that the situation can be overcome. We are determined to continue to work with the government and civil society organizations in Bangladesh to help them improve democratic governance and protection of human rights, and we appreciate the support of the Congress in these efforts. On the whole, while Bangladesh faces many challenges, there is reason for optimism for a prosperous and truly democratic Bangladesh.

Thank you. I welcome questions from you and the Members of the Caucus.